

Katyn: Unanswered Questions

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The air crash earlier this year in Russia in which the Polish premier and many senior members of his government perished, briefly brought Katyn back into public consciousness. They had been journeying there to commemorate the tragic events in 1940 in which 15,000 Polish officers were murdered by the Soviet NKVD. The events in the Katyn forest area in 1940 are today generally known by those amongst the reading public with an interest in history and/or World War Two. There is no longer much controversy over what occurred and thus there is no need to detail the events beyond a relatively brief summary as follows.

Following the 1939 Russian invasion of Poland, the Soviet Union captured some 200,000 Polish prisoners of war. From that number, the Polish officers, numbering approximately 15,000, were separated from the enlisted men and moved to several separate camps in the Soviet Ukraine. In the spring of 1940 they were transported to the Katyn forest area of Russia where they were bound and executed by NKVD units. Surviving family members and Polish officials strongly suspected Soviet foul play and for several years attempted in vain to receive from the Soviet Union an official rendering of the fate of their officers. With the onset of the Russo-German war in 1941, the Polish government in exile became an ally of the USSR and the surviving Polish prisoners were released to form a Polish military under Soviet command. Polish attempts to locate the missing officers intensified but without result.

In 1943 the German army announced to the world their discovery of mass graves in Katyn forest where many Polish officers were found. Representatives from the 'General Government' of Poland were allowed to visit the gravesites and to examine exhumed corpses, and subsequently requested the International Red Cross to undertake an investigation. However, without Russian permission the ICRC refused to do so. In consequence, Germany invited forensic medical specialists from twelve European countries - including neutral Switzerland - to form an International Medical Commission tasked to undertake exhumations and to study the date and manner of death. This medical commission concluded that the deaths were by execution and that they occurred in early 1940, i.e. while the officers were in Soviet hands. Many other international visitors were allowed to visit Katyn and were given a free hand in their own observations and investigations, including some American POWs. As with the commission members, all these visitors were allowed to move about freely and without hindrance or escort.



Exhumation of mass grave of Polish officers killed by NKVD in Katyń Forest in 1940. Germans showing their findings to an international commission made up specialists from several European countries. Published 1943 as picture 23 (23. Einer Kommission kriegsgefangener britischer Offiziere werden die Ergebnisse der Obduktion zugänglich gemacht) on page 296 of: "Amtliches Material zum Massenmord von KATYN", Im Auftrage des Auswärtigen Amtes auf Grund urkundlichen Beweismaterials zusammengestellt, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von der Deutschen Informationsstelle, Zentralverlag der NSDAP. Franz Eher Nachf. GmbH., Berlin 1943. Source: Wikicommons. Photo is in the Public Domain.

The Soviet Union responded to the news by blaming the Germans for the crime, and broke off relations with the Polish government in exile, accusing it of propaganda complicity with the Germans. The USSR steadfastly maintained this 'the Germans did it' line—also parroted by communists and others obedient to the Russian party line—for some fifty years until Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev confirmed in 1990 that the USSR had, indeed, committed the crime.

Such is what is generally known of Katyn. However, other interesting aspects and details surrounding Katyn which are lesser known are useful to consider.

Firstly, those today with little understanding of the nature of Marxism-Leninism remain puzzled as to the purpose of the executions. The communist belief is that the 'intelligentsia' of all nations represent a threat—real or theoretical, present or future—to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', i.e. the nomenclature referencing the Soviet ruling elite, and must be 'liquidated' en masse. In other words, an entire class of people who represent the most intelligent, able, creative, and active members of society are to be physically exterminated. Such genocide has occurred everywhere the Soviets have taken over, and Poland was not to be an exception.

One might think that times and mores have changed since 1940. A documentary film on Katyn was shown in Poland in the 1980s and some Poles had expressed anger over what had happened. Russian journalist Vladimir Abarinov did some groundbreaking research on Katyn in the 1980s and received a letter from an apologist of the NKVD who justified the massacres with: 'Is it really possible that our Polish friends cannot assess what happened from a clear-cut class standpoint? After all, these people were top echelons of the old Polish army that was in the service of the bourgeoisie. Why then, are the Polish comrades beginning to lose their class intuition and slip into nationalist arrogance?' [\[1\]](#) In other words, it was ok, even necessary, to wipe out the cream of Poland's leadership; such was the communist view then, and such it remains today.

Aside from the continued Soviet lies about Katyn, the convoluted politics of the western allies have involved a great deal of misinformation to their own peoples and to the world. These governments understood who the perpetrators were, but this was politically inconvenient to publicly acknowledge. During wartime, the USA and Britain wished to maintain Russian involvement in the war against Germany and were sensitive to the embarrassment and divisiveness which Katyn represented. They also hoped that by appeasing Stalin over Katyn—i.e. if they would continue to lie to the world—it might preempt his forming a Polish communist government on Soviet soil. So they maintained the fiction that Katyn was probably the act of the Germans or at the very least that they 'did not know' the real perpetrators. Poland was pressured by the western allies to go along, to exercise 'proper discipline', and a concerted voice casting suspicion on Germany was presented to the world. Thus the world's peoples were lied to and were led to believe that Katyn was probably a German crime or that we would never

know the facts of it. As for a Polish communist satellite government, Stalin went ahead with that anyway.

In point of fact, with the 1943 revelations, the only nation telling the truth about Katyn was Germany. For Germany it served the purpose of helping to reveal to the world the nature of Soviet communism, as well as—it was hoped—to drive a wedge between the USSR and Poland and the western allies.

The location of the prisoners prior to their execution is also of interest. The three main camps housing the 15,000 Polish officers were former Christian church compounds. Kozielsk was a former Orthodox monastery, Starobielsk was also a former monastery and Orthodox church, and Ostashkov too was located on former Christian Orthodox monastery grounds. Perhaps the Soviet NKVD made such selections for the prisoners because of the allegedly high component of Jews serving in its uppermost ranks, venting a hatred towards Christianity and the former Tsarist system. Or perhaps it was all coincidental. According to Abarinov, the NKVD had a 'partiality' for using church buildings this way, in his view as a political act of desecration of Russia's sacred places^[2]. However, there is no known information of the NKVD using former synagogues or mosques as places of imprisonment, torture, and execution.

A 'large number of applications' by Jews^[3] within the ranks of the Polish officers made formal request to the NKVD authorities for special treatment, praising the Soviet Union and asking to be separated from the Poles and admitted as citizens of the USSR. How many were thus saved and admitted is not known. This is noteworthy in view of the well-known solidarity of the officers whilst in captivity.

In the early postwar period the International Military Tribunal was persuaded by the USSR to bring up Katyn as a war crime and it attempted to assign blame for it on the Germans. The Soviet perspective on trials was eminently political. In their view, defendants are already guilty because the police apparatus had decided it is so, therefore trials are mere formalities. Western jurists at Nuremberg were not much different in this respect of course, but still attempted from time to time to at least put on a show of objectivity and to listen to defendants' testimony and evidence. But in the case of Katyn the evidence was too flimsy and the defense testimony too telling.

German defense counsels were allowed to mount a defense but were prohibited from themselves making accusations against the USSR; i.e. they could work to disprove the version of the prosecution but could not present their own version. They did manage to present sufficient evidence and testimony to clear their clients and the IMT dropped the matter. It was obvious to the tribunal that the Germans had not committed the deed, so who could the perpetrator have been? Rather than pursue that line, the charges were discreetly dropped.

Really, that was quite an accomplishment for defense counsel, since Article 21 of the IMT charter read: 'The Tribunal shall not demand evidence about the commonly known facts and will consider them proved. The Tribunal shall likewise accept without evidence the official government documents and reports of the United Nations, including protocols and documents of the committees created in various allied countries for an investigation of the war crimes, proceedings and sentences of military or other tribunals of each of the United Nations.' That is worth re-reading and pondering closely. It is how many innocent Germans were convicted and executed at Nuremberg.

With the onset of the Cold War, the international political climate had radically changed and it was now in the interest of the western allies to resurrect Katyn and this time to point the finger of blame at the USSR. Angry Soviet denials continued, chimed in with by the new communist government of 'liberated' Poland, now a controlled satellite of the USSR. In 1952 a group of American Congressmen chaired by Ray Madden released a statement introducing House Resolutions 390 and 539 resolving Congress to form a committee to investigate Katyn and bring the perpetrators to justice. Resolution 390 was adopted, the committee was formed, and hearings were held.^[4] Of course nothing came of it as it was a mere propaganda exercise. But such an exercise would have been politically impossible a decade earlier. High-profile speeches made by various American and British politicians during the early postwar period were similar exercises, intended to harden attitudes against the Soviet Union albeit without any practical effects.

A 1950 statement^[5] issued by Polish General Anders asked for enquiries and demanded that war criminals be brought to justice. It is noteworthy because of the moral stance taken by Anders in appealing for 'all war criminals of this past war' to meet with 'adequate punishment'. He also expressed his 'sincere thanks and appreciation to all those who preferred to put justice and truth before illusory political interests'. When reading something like this perhaps one could be forgiven for being appalled at the hypocrisy of someone like Anders. During the war he instilled in himself 'proper discipline' to not accuse the Soviets, expediently putting 'justice and truth' well behind the 'illusory political interests' of the time.

General Anders was also surely aware of the massacres of ethnic Germans in Poland just prior to the 1939 war as well as the massacres of ethnic Germans there in the months and years after the war's close. It was illusory political interests that made Poles and the other allies say and do nothing about such crimes, putting justice and truth far behind those interests. In 1940 the German Library of Information in New York published a book^[6] documenting the thousands of dead or missing ethnic Germans who perished in Poland at the hands of Poles in 1939. They estimated some 58,000 dead or missing while later researchers lowered the estimate to at least 5,000. If 5,000 Americans had been murdered anywhere in the world, it would certainly have resulted in a declaration of war. The world has paid very little attention to these crimes. They were not introduced at the Nuremberg IMT trials, no American congressional committee has called for justice, and no speech by Anders or any other prominent Pole has addressed this matter. Regardless of the number of fatalities, no attention at all has been focused here.

This is not meant as a digression, but as a contextual issue related to Katyn. Massacres of ethnic Germans did in large measure did lead to the final breakdown of relations between Germany and Poland and to the German-Soviet invasions. This in turn led to the internment of hundreds of thousands of Polish troops by the Soviets and to the massacre of 15,000 of its leadership cadres, i.e. the 'intelligentsia' of Poland. It would have been tragically ironic if any of these officers had taken part in the pre-war massacres of ethnic Germans. If Germany and Poland had reasonably and peacefully addressed their mutual problems in 1939, the Katyn of 1940 would not have occurred.

One must wonder how to look at all this. These numbers pale in comparison with victims of Allied bombing or with the millions who perished in postwar Europe's forced population movements or 'transfers'. And even those figures pale in comparison with the scores of millions of victims of Stalin's GULAG or with Mao's even greater crimes in China. But this is not really a numbers game. It is about the

uniqueness of a crime in which the officer elite of an army is deliberately selected out and destroyed. However, even here one must reconsider. Stalin at Yalta had told his western counterparts that he would like to see, or intended that, '50,000 German officers' were to be shot at war's conclusion. His western allies thought or pretended to think that he was joking. In actuality a figure probably far higher of German officers were murdered by Stalin's henchmen, as literally millions of German POWs of all ranks in Soviet captivity were never seen again. So what is unique about Katyn? It was a disaster for Poland to be sure, but one receiving attention because the 15,000 served as a political football by all sides both during and after the war.

A final issue is quite intriguing. To what extent did the Soviet secret police and their German counterparts cooperate between 1939 and 1941? Exchanging information, prisoners passed to and fro, etc., in accord with the secret protocols of the 1939 German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact? Abarinov cites prisoner transfers and even relates an interesting high-profile case^[7] in which a German prisoner deported to Germany from the USSR had a suitcase containing his underwear go missing whilst still in Russian hands. Enquiries about this went as high as the Soviet People's Commissar Merkulov—thus indicating a strong spirit of serious cooperation between the two nations. This in turn raises the possibility that information about the Katyn massacres may have been secretly passed to German security officials long before the German invasion of the Soviet Union. There is no evidence for this, it is a speculation only. But supposing it had, the question then raised is why did the Germans only reveal Katyn in the summer of 1943, rather than earlier?

This and many other questions may never be answered about Katyn. The perpetrators themselves are mostly passed away, the documentary evidence is still only gradually surfacing from the former Soviet archives, and much of same has been destroyed and is thus lost forever. The world has mostly forgotten Katyn—although Poland remembers. But it too must remember other, related events from its own history, if justice is to ever prevail.

Sources:

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- *Katyn: A Crime without Parallel*, by Louis Fitzgibbon, Tom Stacey Ltd., London, 1971
- Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority in Poland, German Library of Information, New York, 1940

Notes:

^[1] Abarinov. *The Murderers of Katyn*. p.11

^[2] Ibid., p.107

^[3] Ibid., pp.114-116

[4] Full text of Congressional statement in Fitzgibbon, *Katyn*. pp.197-201

[5] Full text of Anders, *ibid.*, pp.185-190

[6] *Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority in Poland*. German Library of Information, New York, 1940

[7] Abarinov, *ibid.*, p. 37

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